

TRAIL CREW NOTES

7/12 – 7/18/23

Location: Lower Cameron Creek Trail, ONP

Crew members:

Rebecca Wanagel
Martin Knowles
Brian Berg
David Graves

Packers:

Entry: ONP Mule Packer, Hans Flockoi with mules Smoke, Ellie Mae and Jaime
Exit: 3 human packers - Mike Danisiewicz, Gay Hunter, Randy Kraxberger

Estimated Volunteer Hours:

Crew: 228

Human Packers: 24

(Hours do not include driving time, admin and organization time, camping time, etc. Only active working time.)

Report written by Rebecca.

Objective:

1. Clear the logs on the neglected Lower Cameron Creek trail to the Grand Pass junction, and repair tread as necessary.
2. Find and clear stock fords.

As a small crew of 4, we had two working as the saw team (Martin and Rebecca) and two working as the tread team (David and Brian). With long days and hard work, we achieved the goal a day faster than expected. The result is that Lower Cameron trail is once again a true pleasure to hike or ride.

This is a remarkable trail. It does nothing in moderation. The extreme beauty and power of the “creek” (river!) is awe-inspiring. For much of the first half of the trail, you’re almost always next to or in view of it. This trail also does not moderate its hills. Undulating trails are interesting and fun, but I will readily admit that the humps on this trail are never gradual. Steep and frequent are words that come to mind, though thankfully they are never exceedingly long. They do get tiring when one is carrying tools. The last 2 miles of the trail from the old, burned shelter to the Grand Pass junction are the longest two miles I think I’ve ever encountered. The steep hills, thick brush, numerous mountain beaver holes and rocks through hot, sunny meadows slowed us down significantly. But that is also where the views get expansive, and the sub-alpine vegetation replaces that of the lower altitudes. Furry-barked Alaskan yellow cedar replaces the firs of below. Subalpine spirea replaces the wild rose and salmonberry (and sometimes devils club, yuck!) we had trudged through off and on for miles. The high ridges between Cameron and Graywolf to the south and Grand to the north, Cameron Peak, Shelter Peak ... it really starts getting grandiose up there. I know from experience that once you get to the upper reaches of Upper Cameron Basin (we didn’t clear quite that far) it gets jaw-dropping as the far-away views become closeups.

This is how it went:

Wednesday, July 12:

We drove up to Deer Park Road. Meanwhile, Donovan Rafferty (volunteer seasonal ranger for Deer Park) was providing Hans, ONP Packer, with an escort up that narrow, twisty one-lane road (he escorted Hans back down after we were deposited below, and the pack team arrived back up top). Hans had the leader, Smoke, along with the pack mules Ellie Mae and Jaime. They were three exceedingly calm, quiet, hard-working animals. They are so fit that I don’t think this trip really even fazed them despite it being 4 miles constantly down to Three Forks and a 4-mile grind back uphill. Since we were a team of 4, we did not have an abundance of gear, and only needed two pack mules. We carried our own camp gear, but the mules took our food, tools, gas and oil.

Once at Three Forks, we set up camp, snacked and got to work clearing stock fords. Grand Creek had two logs blocking it. Cameron Creek (these two fords are nearly within spitting distance of each other) was a complete and total mess. Martin gets extra kudos for this day because he was the one who volunteered to spend a long time in the creeks cutting out the blocking trees on both fords. Of course, he kinda didn't have a choice because the Cameron Creek log was getting too high for my reach. Grand went quickly, but Cameron took the team 3 hours to clear both the water and shoreline access. Believe me, Martin's feet were plenty numb and his chainsaw pants were completely soaked. That water is COLD. What a trooper.

Once we got the fords cleaned up, we had time left in the day, so we got started on Cameron Creek Trail. We (Martin and Rebecca) cleared a few trees and the David / Brian tread team started doing preliminary work on the first major problem.

Back to Three Forks for the evening. There was a little bit of light rain and chilly temps, a surprise in this dry summer.





GRAND CREEK FORD: BEFORE



GRAND CREEK FORD: AFTER



CAMERON CREEK FORD: BEFORE



CAMERON CREEK FORD: DURING



CAMERON CREEK FORD: AFTER (ALSO THE PATH LEADING TO IT WAS CLEARED)



FIRST LOG CLEARED ON CAMERON CREEK TRAIL.

Thursday, July 13:

This day we worked from where we left off yesterday. For the saw team, that was about $\frac{1}{4}$ mile uptrail. For the tread team, about $\frac{3}{4}$. We (saw team) ended up being at our first project for 3 hours. It was a collection of 4 rather large logs. No problems here (well, except for one stuck saw incident that added a little time), it just takes time to cut off all those rounds that are small enough so we can handle their weight. Meanwhile, the tread team was building a strong rock wall to support a section of tread that was destroyed by a torn-out rootball, doing drainage and fixing another tread issue. We all made it to about 1.2 miles up trail and then cached the tools for the night.

Back to Three Forks for the evening.



WHAT A MESS! A TREE FELL AWAY FROM THE TRAIL, AND THE ROOTBALL TORE OUT THE TRAIL.





DAVID AND BRIAN WERE THE EXPERT TREAD CREW. THEY USED SOLID REPAIR TECHNIQUES. NOTICE THAT THE BASE OF THIS SMALL ROCK WALL IS SET ON FIRM GROUND THAT THEY DUG OUT. ONCE MORE ROCKS ARE PILED ON TOP AND LOCKED IN, THERE IS NO WAY THIS CAN SLIP OUT.



MUD WAS AN ISSUE HERE TOO, BUT WITH THE PROPER REPAIR, THIS DRIED OUT AS THE DAYS WENT ON. IT WAS DRY BY THE TIME WE HIKED OVER THIS MANY TIMES ON THE LAST DAY.



TREAD REPAIR OFTENTIMES MEANS MOVING LARGE, EXTREMELY HEAVY ROCKS.



**BUT, FORTUNATELY OR UNFORTUNATELY, ONCE THE REPAIR IS DONE, IT LOOKS LIKE ... TREAD.
HIKERS AND STOCK WILL NEVER NOTICE AND NEVER KNOW THERE WAS ANYTHING WRONG.**



MEANWHILE, MANY OF THE LOGS CUT BY THE SAW TEAM WERE ON A STEEP HILLSIDE. MANY HAD DETACHED ROOTBALLS OR WERE PARTS OF TREES BROKEN OFF. WE WERE CONSTANTLY ANALYZING THE POTENTIAL OF THESE PROJECTS TO SLIDE, AND ENGAGING STRATEGIES TO MITIGATE RISK (MANY TIMES THAT IS IN OUR CHOICE OF ANGLES ON THE CUTS). IT'S HARD TO SEE IN THIS PICTURE, BUT THERE IS A ROOTBALL HOVERING DETACHED AT THE TOP.



4 LOG MESS: BEFORE (YOU CAN'T SEE THE 4TH AND LARGEST ONE IN THE BACK)



4 LOG MESS: AFTER (NOW YOU ARE SEEING THE LAST 3 LOGS, BUT NOT THE FIRST ONE.

Friday, July 14:

We packed up camp and moved it to a spot at the first crossing on Cameron, 2 miles up. Once there we set up camp, snacked and then hiked 8/10 mile back to our cache to continue working forward.

Both teams continued their work with the goal of getting the tools and work to our new camp location. Tread team got to work immediately with a rock slide in a draw, while the saw team continued clearing blocking logs. The saw team spent 4.5 hours on two sites that were near each other. Large, swampy, and messy for one log and the other project was several trees that had been down for x number of years – debris everywhere. It took a while to clean this one up. In this spot we opted to leave a large overhead log, but moved the tread so that where it crosses under a log has about 7 feet clearance. That is not perfect for stock. The rider must either dismount or lay low on their mount, but the animals can pass through – even if loaded with tools.

While the saw team was cleaning up that mess, the tread team had finished rebuilding the tread in the rock slide (amazing rock work!), moved up behind us and literally drained a swamp! (or most of it). Before the tread team arrived, we had to swim through hard-to-penetrate salmonberry where we couldn't see our feet – which was just as well because we would have seen nothing but boots sinking into mud when they weren't falling into mountain beaver holes or big dips in the tread. The only saving grace was the constant supply of ripe salmonberries to munch on. When the tread team was done, there were 3 well-placed working drainages, a path cleared through the dense salmonberry forest, and no holes to twist one's ankle. The only drawback is now we had to reach about a foot farther to get to the ripe berries. Oh, the sacrifices.

Finally, the tread and saw teams made it to the new camp and set down tools for the evening. The first 2 miles of trail had taken hard work for 2+ long days. We settled down in this camp, which is right by the first crossing where you go from the north to the south side of the creek.

We were going to get the tools ferried across the "footlog" to have them ready on the other side for the morning. But in scouting the first part of the other side, Martin got stung 3 times when he moved a branch and disturbed a nest. We decided to let it rest for the evening.



ROCK SLIDE: BEFORE



ROCK SLIDE: AFTER



JUMBLED LOG MESS: BEFORE (HIKER WAS COMING ACROSS JUST AS I NEEDED A BEFORE PICTURE)



JUMBLED LOG MESS: AFTER. WE OPTED TO LEAVE THE OVERHEAD LOG FOR SEVERAL REASONS, NOT THE LEAST OF WHICH IS THAT THE COSTS OUTWEIGHED THE BENEFITS. THERE IS A 7-FOOT CLEARANCE SO, AT MOST, A RIDER WOULD HAVE TO LAY DOWN OR DISMOUNT. BUT EVEN A TOOL-LOADED MULE COULD PASS UNDER THIS. OUR TREAD TEAM CAME ALONG JUST IN TIME TO MOVE THE TRAIL FURTHER UP TO PASS UNDER THE HIGHEST POINT.

Saturday, July 15:

We ferried tools across the “footlog.” I keep putting that in scare quotes because it is a nature-donated tree that at one point had been flattened and roughened for tread purposes, but since then has been tilted by the creek. So anyhow, we’ll just keep calling it a “footlog” because you do walk on feet and it is a log.

Stock ford here is right out of camp, which you access by going straight instead of turning left to go to aforementioned footlog.

The saw team started working upstream on the south side of the river while the tread team went back to work on another tread issue in a gully (more incredible rock wall work!). Eventually the tread team caught up to us. The south side is where the trail stays for a scant mile before crossing back over. More log cutting. More tread work and triage brushing (which means there is no way we’re going to start trying to make a dent in the immense amount of

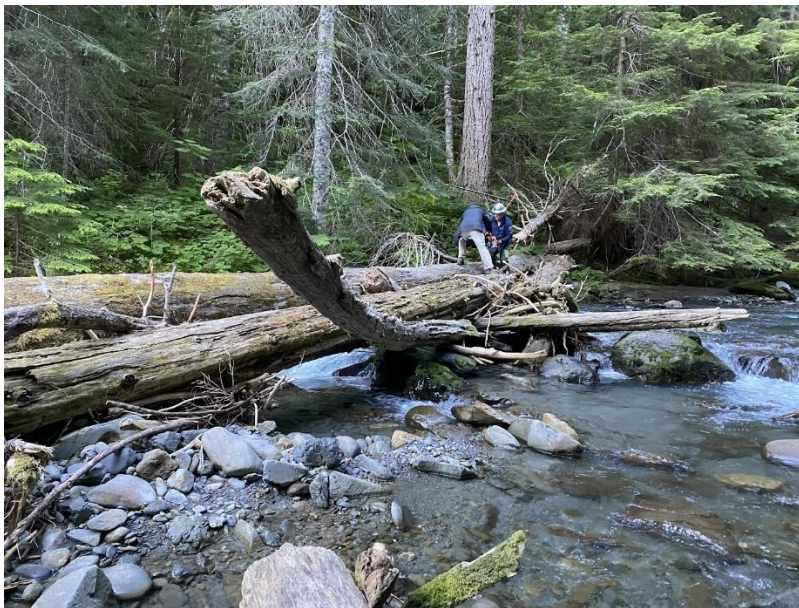
brush over the trail, but sometimes you've got to cut back slide alder or other brush that is making travel over slippery rocks treacherous.

Eventually we worked our way to the second crossing, which takes you back to the north side of the creek. We got it cleared and repaired to there for hikers, but then David reminded us that we needed to find and uncover the stock ford. We followed some old cut logs, found the ford and cleared out two blocking trees to open it back up. On the other side was a small 6" log that David took out with a hand saw.

To cross here, if you're a human, you use another nature-donated tree. But this one is huge, straight, and wide. Easy-peasy. How do these trees keep falling right where you need them? There are more like this on the S. Fork Skok, Morganroth Creek (which has met its demise now but used to be an excellent crossing) and Kahkwa Creek in the Bogachiel drainage, and others. Odd ... but I digress.

We kept moving forward. The saw team had no work for about a half mile or so. The tread team had another project five minutes after the crossing. Bad news here: stock is going to have to stop at the small camp right by the second crossing. Five minutes upstream from that spot, there is a landslide area that has loose tread going through it. It was sketchy for the saw team to go through without slipping to the creek below. The tread team fixed this and made it easily hikable, but stock is too heavy to go through without causing the loose tread to simply slip away. If you're familiar with the Pyramid Peak trail, it's like that but on a much smaller scale. This is too bad because there wasn't anything else as we worked up that we would have deemed non-stock worthy. It's just this one spot.

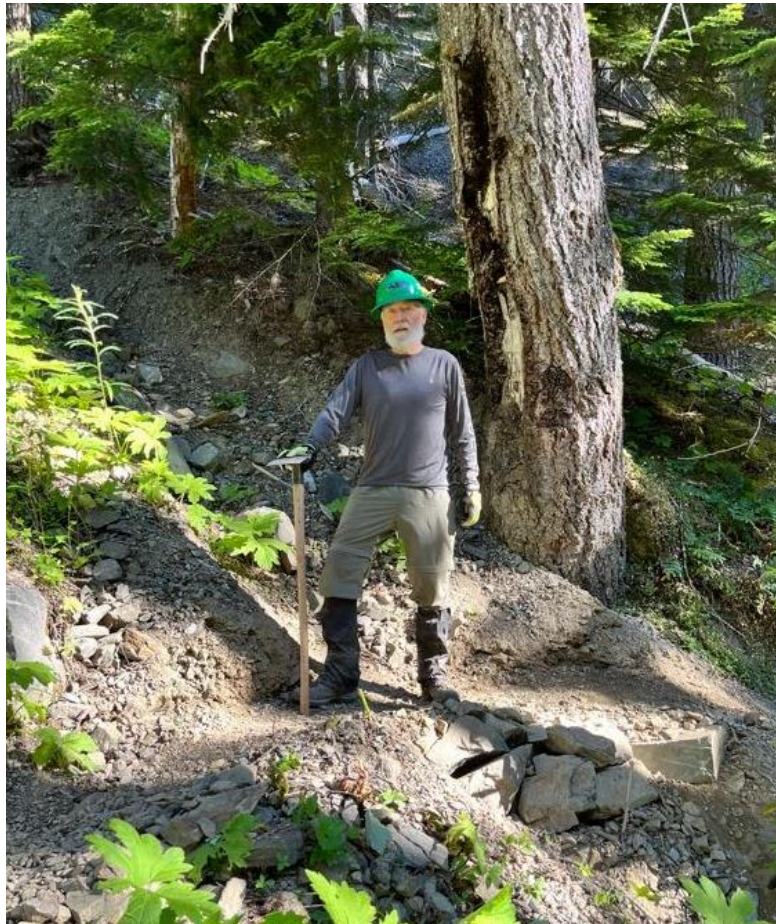
Eventually we got to a pre-set stopping time, cached the tools, and went back to camp. We were about 2.5 miles upstream past camp now, so we had about an hour hike back.



WORKING AS A TEAM TO GET TOOLS ACROSS THE "FOOTLOG"



**YET ANOTHER ROCK FORTIFICATION PROJECT.
THIS WAS AT THE TOP OF A GULLY WHERE YOU DO NOT WANT TO SLIP AND FALL.**



**EXPERTLY DONE. STRONG AND SOLID. THEY ALSO PUT NEW TREAD ACROSS A VERY
ROCKY, THIN TREAD STRETCH OF TRAIL STARTING FROM THIS POINT.**



STARTING ON A 27" LOG THAT WAS ABOUT 5' OFF THE GROUND AND DIAGONAL ACROSS THE TRAIL.



ONCE RELEASED, WE WERE RESTRICTED BY A MOUND BEHIND ME, AND WE KNEW ANY LARGE PIECE WE CUT OFF WOULD BE TOO HEAVY TO MOVE AND WOULD ALSO LAND IN THE RUT OF A TRAIL (HARD TO CUT WITHOUT GETTING THE SAW IN THE DIRT).

WE DECIDED TO MAKE ABOUT 7 PARTIAL CUTS, OFFSIDE AND UNDERSIDE ... (SEE NEXT PICTURE)



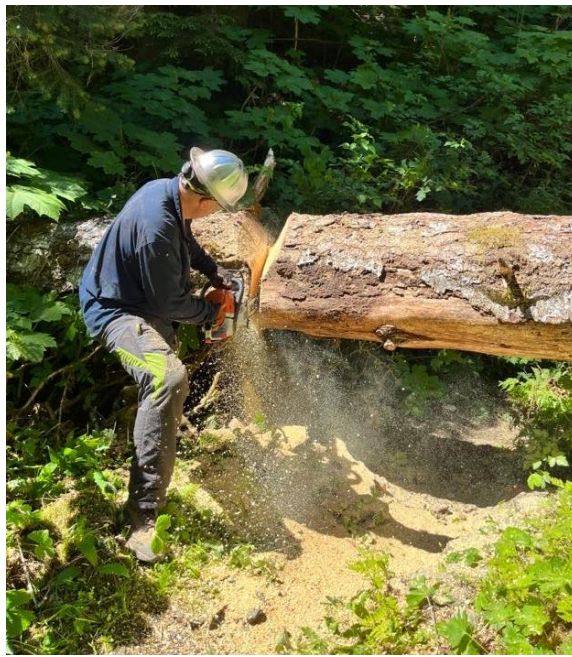
... THEN DROP THE LARGE PIECE, WHICH ROLLED OVER INTO THE TRAIL ...



THEN IT WAS EASY TO PUT THE SAW BACK IN THE KERF AND SAW UP TO FINISH ALL THE PARTIAL CUTS. THE SAW NEVER HAD TO GET NEAR THE DIRT.



THEN ALL WE HAD TO DO WAS KEEP DROPPING MANAGEABLE-SIZED ROUNDS. WE MADE 20 CUTS IN ALL ON THIS TREE.



FURTHER UP THE TRAIL, GETTING CLOSE TO THE SECOND CROSSING. THIS TREE WAS DIFFICULT FOR HIKERS TO GET OVER, UNDER OR AROUND. IT WAS BURIED IN SALMONBERRY (THORNY), WILD ROSE (MORE THORNY) AND DEVILS CLUB (EXTREMELY THORNY).



SOMETIMES MOVING THE BILLETS OR FINDING A PLACE TO PUT THEM IS MUCH HARDER THAN ACTUALLY CUTTING THE LOG.

Sunday July 16:

Now we had to make a decision. Either move camp up to a spot 1.5 miles upriver or leave camp as is and just make it a goal to get to the junction that day (we didn't want to have to make the long hike again the next day). Based on scouting information, we knew we could make it to the junction that day, so we opted to leave camp where it was. We hiked the 2.5 miles back to where we left off the previous day (over the creek and through the brush to grandmother's house we go ...).

Now we joined as one team because the higher up we got, the fewer tread problems there were. However, we needed the tread team because the miles were long, the hills were steep, and the direct sun felt hot. We needed to spread the work and carrying load. We had just a few items to cut out in order to get to an old, burned shelter foundation. From there we knew we had a scant 2 miles to go until the junction. No problem, we figured. If we get to the junction, maybe we'll have enough time and energy left to keep working a little more upstream.

Ha.

That was the longest scant 2 miles I believe I have ever encountered aside from off-trail travel I've done over the years. Gorgeous views? Oh my, yes. But the travel was steep, hot and slow. None of the multiple projects were difficult, so we just kept making our way across the terrain, cutting out whatever was in the way. Finally, we got to the junction and cut the last tree around 1:45 in the afternoon. At that point I declared that there was not a snowball's chance in Florida of us continuing past the junction. Instead of arguments, I got cheers. Tools down.

Oh, but wait. Tools must be carried back to camp. Now that's 4.5 miles away. Back we go!

We spent one more evening in our riverside camp.



THERE IS A LANDSLIDE ABOUT 5 MINUTES PAST THE SECOND CROSSING. THIS IS THE ONE STOCK-STOPPER ON THE LOWER CAMERON TRAIL. IT LOOKS FINE HERE, BECAUSE THE TREAD TEAM PUT SAFE TREAD BACK IN ACROSS THIS SOFT SLIDE. BUT THE WEIGHT OF A HORSE OR MULE WOULD SEND IT SLIDING DOWN, TAKING THE ANIMAL AND RIDER WITH IT.



THE BIGGER PICTURE. ADMITTEDLY, IT DOESN'T LOOK THAT BAD HERE. YOU CAN SEE THE LINE OF TREAD THAT DAVID AND BRIAN PUT IN. BUT WE ALL AGREE THAT THIS GRAVELLY, SOFT SOIL WOULD NOT SUPPORT THE WEIGHT OF STOCK AND IT IS STEEPER THAN IT LOOKS.



WE KEPT WORKING OUR WAY UP, CUTTING OUT EVERY TREE.



BRIAN AND DAVID DID NOT HAVE PRESSING TREAD WORK UP HERE, SO THEY CARRIED TOOLS AND GAS, AND MOVED ALL THE CUT PIECES OFF THE TRAIL.



LAST TREE, RIGHT BEFORE THE GRAND PASS JUNCTION.



PROOF THAT WE MADE IT TO THE JUNCTION. TIRED TEAM (INCLUDING REBECCA BEHIND THE CAMERA).



THE VIEWS START GETTING AMAZING UP HERE.



AND DOWN BELOW YOU CAN SEE FROM THE FRESHLY CUT LOG THAT WE FREQUENTLY HAD QUITE A LOVELY BACKDROP TO OUR WORK. CAMERON CREEK WAS A CONSTANT PRESENCE.



THESE GORGEOUS VIEWS ARE ACCESSIBLE ONCE AGAIN TO HIKERS AND STOCK.

Monday, July 17:

Prior to this trip, I had arranged for some human packers to come get our tools because there was no way either one of these things were going to happen:

1. We carry tools out on top of our camp supplies.
2. We do two laps of that grind of a hill called Three Forks trail.

The packers I had recruited knew that they might have to do long miles to retrieve our tools from somewhere up the Cameron trail. However, since we ended a day before I anticipated, we decided to move the tools to Three Forks for them before packing up to head out ourselves. We gathered all the tool supplies and made the hike along the now extremely pleasant (but still undulating) two miles back to Three Forks. It was highly satisfying walking back through all the sawdust of the dozens of cut trees and stepping easily over tread spots where before we had struggled to keep our balance. Cached the tools at Three Forks. Hiked back to camp. Packed up camp and hiked (for the 3rd time that morning) the two miles back to Three Forks. Filled up with water and started the 4 mile relentlessly uphill hike back to Deer Park. For reference: Three Forks is at 2100 feet, Deer Park is at 5400. Do the math and you will see why we could not carry tools on top of camp, nor make a double lap. After all the work, hills, miles and heat of the previous day(s), this climb didn't feel as friendly to me as it has in the past.

But waiting at the top was Donovan! With lunch! And cold drinks! What a treat! Love that guy!!



SORRY, WE WERE TIRED TO WHERE WE DIDN'T GET A GOOD PICTURE OF DONOVAN! 😞 BUT THE LUNCH AND HIS COMPANY WAS AWESOME AND EXTREMELY APPRECIATED. 😊

<later ...>

SAVED BY ERIC NAGLE!

HE GOT A GOOD SHOT OF DONOVAN THE WEEK BEFORE AT THE DEER PARK RANGER STATION.



Tuesday, July 18:

Human packers Mike, Gay and Randy drove to Deer Park, hiked down to Three Forks, found and packed our gear and made that same 3300 foot trek back up that we had done the day before. Guess what they got at the top? You guessed it ... lunch and amazing company! Donovan is so incredibly appreciative and supportive of the work that volunteer trail crew members do to keep trails open.

Fun fact, it was Mike who first mentioned to Donovan what a mess this trail was (it is one of Mike's favorite trails, and now I see why) ... and last year when we worked on the Graywolf was when Donovan asked me if I could lead a crew on this trail. And now, here we are.



THIS PICTURE IS TO INSPIRE YOU AND GIVE YOU MORE INSIGHT INTO WHY THIS TRAIL IS SO IMPORTANT. THIS IS UPPER CAMERON BASIN, JUST A COUPLE OF MILES PAST WHERE OUR CREW LEFT OFF. PICTURE TAKEN BY REBECCA A FEW YEARS AGO ON A SEPTEMBER BACKPACK. THAT LITTLE TINY STREAM IS CAMERON CREEK IN ITS INFANCY.